Fowl Feathered Review

№ 173

Issue № 173: Upon Swimming in the Shallow End of a Desert.

Fowl Feathered Review is a quarterly, a disordered artifact of the human impulse to categorize and consume the ephemeral. Produced by the Springwound Mammoth Pancake Coalition—an entity distinct from its waffle-centric counterpart—it is birthed under the Fowlpox Press imprint. Virgil Kay, its editor, presides over this enterprise from a paper canoe adrift on the Passagassawakeag, a river of dubious depth and even more dubious inhabitants. Surrounded by featherheads and their aquatic card games, Kay's reign is absolute, his word the final arbiter in the transformation of boastful souls into doormats. Layout and visual conceits are the province of Cookie Granola, while melodrama and histrionics fall under the purview of Childe Harold. Silent Bill, in his characteristically taciturn manner, provides necessary pauses. The review's structural integrity, or lack thereof, is the domain of Unkie Bob, whose talents extend to the mitigation of typographical errors and the prevention of electrical conflagrations. Everett Enótita serves as Kay's indispensable amanuensis, and the Ecum Secum Literary Brain Trust, in a gesture of dubious beneficence, offers nominal financial support. Printed upon the verdant expanse of Bald Porcupine Island, and laced with the enigmatic Kraa, a bioengineered culinary enigma, the Fowl Feathered Review remains a testament to human ingenuity, or perhaps merely a symptom of cultural decline. ISSN: 1929-7238.

"I am an observer of life, a non-participant who takes no sides. I am in the regimented society, but not of it."

--Moondog, The Viking of 6th Avenue

Return Policy:
If this magazine does not meet your expectations, please return it to us in its original condition for a full refund, minus the cost of enlightenment.

Submissions

Fowlpox Press: A Submission Guide for the Determined (or Deluded)
To the Aspiring Artist (or Sandwich Enthusiast):

1. **Craft** (or **Culinary Construct**): 2-227 poems, a numerical range that hints at both ambition and a troubling lack of self-editing, may find their way to our digital doorstep (fowlpoxpress@mail2poet.com). Alternatively, for the visually inclined, paintings numbered 2-953 (a prolific career, or perhaps a basement overflowing with forgotten canvases?) are welcome. We are also, inexplicably, open to submissions of twelve-inch sandwiches.
2. **The Gatekeeper:** Address your offerings to Virgil Kay, Editor. In posession of remarkably discerning taste, or so he believes, Virgil is a rooster of some renown, a creature of instinct and inexplicable confidence. His title, "China Wok Habitue," suggests a broader palate than one might expect from a bird, though it's more likely a testament to the local takeout joint's generous portions. (**Please note:** Include a bio, a desperate plea for recognition that will likely join the unread masses in the digital purgatory of our slush pile.)
3. **Format:** Poems, those valiant attempts at capturing the human experience in meter and rhyme, should be attached in a Word document or PDF. Paintings, windows into your soul (or a weekend spent with Bob Ross reruns), must be submitted in JPEG, TIFF, or a format our aging technology can comprehend. Jokes, if they exist, should be delivered in MP3 format. We are, alas, not equipped to handle the nuanced art of the live performance. Sandwiches, a curious offering in the realm of artistic expression, require clear plastic wrapping and a small packet of Kewpie Mayonnaise. (**Pro-tip:** The Kewpie packaging is, undeniably, a work of art in its own right, and we encourage you to admire it before consumption.)
4. **The Cycle Continues:** We exist in a perpetual state of acceptance and rejection. A Sisyphean task, some might say. We receive submissions 365 days a year, a testament to the relentless hope, or perhaps blissful ignorance, of aspiring artists. However, with a heavy heart (and a full crop), we must inform you that rejections also occur 365 days a year.
5. **The Sandwiches:** Ah, the sandwiches. These, unlike your artistic endeavors, find a permanent home within our editorial sanctum. Virgil, in his infinite wisdom, has determined that a diet rich in carbohydrates is essential for maintaining his regal demeanor.
6. **Leap Year Follies:** Leap years, those extra days gifted by the whims of the calendar, offer no reprieve. Aspiring poets, it seems, are undeterred by such temporal anomalies. You are, however, cordially invited to "take a flying leap" during these additional 24 hours.

Please proceed with caution. Artistic aspirations are a delicate dance, and the path to publication is littered with the fallen hopes of countless dreamers. But hey, maybe your sandwich is killer. Just remember, Kewpie or bust.

Fowl Feathered Review | Poets & Writers (pw.org)

"Non ignora mali, miseris succurrere disco."

— Virgil, The Aeneid

Stauer

Miracles in Miniature

By Aislin Rowntree

The chipped Formica of the counter held the usual detritus: a stray mainspring, a loupe smudged with fingerprint ghosts, a velvet cloth the color of faded amethyst. Elias, his fingers thick yet surprisingly nimble, cradled the skeletal remains of a Waltham. Twenty-four karat gold, the hallmark a tiny sunburst, and the audacity of a seventy-five-year guarantee etched on the inner caseback. He breathed on the intricate gears, each a testament to a bygone era of unwavering faith in craftsmanship.

The bell above the door tinkled, a fragile counterpoint to the rhythmic tick-tock symphony emanating from the shelves. A girl stood there, barely a woman, clutching a watch in a small, trembling hand. Stauer. The name bloomed in Elias's mind like a particularly noxious weed. Mass-produced ephemera, designed to mimic value, destined for the landfill. He imagined the internal monologue spilling out, a torrent of horological disdain: Pot metal pretending to be stainless steel, a movement likely held together with wishful thinking and the tears of exploited laborers. But his lips, seasoned by decades of polite commerce, curved into a gentle smile.

"This belonged to my grandad," she said, her voice a hesitant whisper. "It... it stopped."

He took the watch, its faux-Roman numerals mocking him. The weight was all wrong, the plating thin and already showing the brassy underbelly. He opened it with practiced ease. Inside, the expected chaos: a battery leaked like a forgotten wound, corrosion blooming across the cheap circuitry. Hopeless. Utterly, irredeemably hopeless. Yet, he nodded slowly, his gaze meeting her earnest, hopeful eyes.

"Let's see what we can do," he murmured, a phrase he'd uttered countless times, often a prelude to gentle disappointment. He knew, with a certainty that settled deep in his bones, that this particular timepiece was beyond resurrection. A phantom tick, perhaps, a fleeting illusion of life coaxed from scavenged parts.

“You have so many watches,” she observed, her gaze drifting to the mirrored wall behind him, reflecting the crowded shelves in an infinite regression of ticking timepieces. Bulova, Hamilton, a stately old Rolex Oyster Perpetual catching the light. Each a story, a miniature universe contained within polished cases.
“My little cosmos,” he chuckled, the sound rumbling in his chest, a surprising eruption of mirth.

She pointed to the mirror. “You should put a watch in the mirror. Then you’ll always have time to reflect.”

The absurdity of it struck him – a watch reflecting a watch, time contemplating time. He laughed again, a full-bellied sound that startled a dust mote dancing in the afternoon sunbeam. “I like that,” he said, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

He rummaged through a drawer overflowing with the discarded husks of lesser watches, a graveyard of broken promises and fleeting trends. A discarded Stauer, identical to hers but with a slightly less ravaged interior, yielded a battery cradle and a few intact gears. With painstaking care, he performed a transplant, a Frankensteinian resurrection in miniature. The second hand, after a hesitant stutter, began its jerky march.

He presented it to her, the glass smudged but the hands moving. A small miracle wrought from the refuse of the temporal world. Her face lit up, a genuine smile that made the cheap metal of the watch seem momentarily less tawdry.

“Thank you,” she breathed, pressing a few crumpled bills into his palm.

He watched her leave, her small figure receding down the street, swallowed by the mundane flow of traffic and pedestrians. She paused at the corner, a fleeting silhouette against the brick buildings, before disappearing. He turned back to the Waltham, its golden heart still silent, and the mirrored wall reflecting a thousand ticking moments, none of them quite the same. The image of a Stauer, endlessly reflecting itself, lingered in his mind, a strange, persistent echo in the quiet hum of his shop.

Guilty

By Alda Monterey

The moon is a poison. It can gnaw on you. Pull at you. Tear up your insides. Cause political unrest in the pumphouse behind your titty. A blood red moon is the worst. It can leave you wishing you were dead. It's a truth serum, sucking out your locked up thoughts and desires and making you vomit them up into the moonlight. The prosecutor and judge in one. That is the blood red moon.

Fast Food

The Flame-Grilled Protocols of the Dust Realm

By Yakka Uluru

Epigraphical Residue:

"There is something deeply suspicious about a slogan that survives the collapse of the currency it was printed on."
– Fragmentary gloss, possibly apocryphal, unearthed from the palimpsest of “Sauce and Sovereignty: A Condiment History of Collapse,” its annotations a friable calligraphy of desiccated Brassica juncea, authorship indeterminate, perhaps a collective hallucination of the pre-Collapse condimentariat.

I. The Oracle of Meat and Flame: A Labyrinthine Cartography

The sun, a malevolent yolk perpetually threatening to rupture the cerulean membrane, beat down upon the osseous sprawl that was once the Australian continent. This was post-diluvium, post-rebranding, post-gustatory Armageddon. Here, amidst the skeletal architectures of drive-thru franchises and the spectral cartographies of defunct loyalty programs, pulsed a fibrillating network known only as The Franchise Wastes. A palimpsest of asphalt and yearning.

At its putrescent umbilicus, a city shimmering in the static hum of defunct neon and the phantom frequencies of forgotten jingles: Jacktown Prime. A chronotope where illumination persisted beyond its energetic rationale, fueled now by the fervent catechism of belief, the Pavlovian residue of advertising’s insistent hum. The very air, a miasma of unresolved longings and the spectral effluvium of synthetic onions, clung to the throat like a half-remembered slogan.

Dominating this tableau of entropy and brand loyalty, the protean figure of Hungry Jack. Part mythos, part trademark, wholly a linguistic slippage. His visage, a perpetually shifting simulacrum, never twice the same. At times, a greasy Pietà of rotisserie chicken, at others, a sentient Woolworths docket, its barcode eyes scanning the void. His throne,

a bricolage of welded fry baskets and the fractured carapaces of soda fountains. His crown, a paper diadem, yes, but one that seemed to flicker with an inner, perhaps heretical, flame.

Within this last redoubt of the old dispensation, the Flame-Grilled Protocols were custodially held—not inscribed on parchment or silicon, but allegedly woven into the molecular helix of a long-vanished Bos taurus primigenius. Whispers, carried on the thermal updrafts and the crackling static of defunct intercoms, spoke of a sentient sauce, a viscous demiurge dreaming in the vats. A polyphony of hearsay, mostly transmitted through the ghostly pronouncements of disembodied voices emanating from rusted speaker grilles.

11. The Return of the King (Burger): A Dialogic Deconstruction with Pickled Interjections

Northward, where the ochre sands dissolved into the granular static of the horizon and the air bore the metallic tang of discontinued saccharine concoctions, lay the Yank Dominion. A dotted-line imperium ruled by the spectral residue of King Burger the First, his consciousness uploaded in the year of our Lord 2038 into the last functional microwave oven at a Shell servo in the desolate expanse of Wagga Wagga. A digital autocrat in a greasy reliquary.

From this immaterial throne, he dispatched his acolytes, the Flame Rite Paladins. Warrior-priests clad in the synthetic shrouds of melted poly-blend uniforms—stitched together with fishing line and held fast by hardened cheese-whiz, adorned with epaulettes fashioned from laminated promotional flyers and reinforced with strips of repurposed seatbelt. Their footwear ranged from mismatched Crocs fused to the soles of combat boots with industrial epoxy to sandals crafted from repurposed burger wrappers, their straps secured with frayed loyalty program lanyards. Astride their rat-rod steeds—nightmarish chimeras of automotive detritus. Bonnets from Mack trucks were grafted onto the chassis of rusted-out Corollas, held together by a precarious latticework of scavenged rebar and the petrified remains of garden hoses. Engines

coughed and sputtered on a volatile cocktail of recycled fry oil and the distilled regrets of bankrupt franchisees, their exhaust pipes belching black smoke and the occasional burst of flame. Wheels, pilfered from everything from shopping trolleys to earthmovers, were crudely bolted onto warped axles, held in place by fervent prayer and strips of what might once have been a children's bicycle tire. Their slogan-emblazoned livery—peeling vinyl letters salvaged from defunct billboards, patched together with strips of duct tape in clashing colours and further embellished with crudely drawn flames rendered in permanent marker—twitched with the nervous energy of outdated marketing. Their battle cry, a corrupted fragment of a once-ubiquitous jingle, a sonic Möbius strip echoing into the desolate future:
"Have it... Have it... Have it Yo—rrrrrRRRrr—"

But this time, the emissaries arrived not to intone their brand-mantras, but to engage in the archaic ritual of parley.

They materialized at the liminal edge of Jacktown, their engines hissing like asthmatic deities, their slogan-emblazoned livery twitching with the nervous energy of outdated marketing. They were met by Tanya, the city's last vestige of diplomatic function, a former shift manager now elevated to the improbable portfolio of Minister of Sauce and Sanity.

Her visage was obscured by a visor, perpetually fogged with the condensation of accumulated irony, its cracked surface held together with strips of sticky tape bearing faded nutritional information. A badge, fashioned from the detritus of obsolete QR codes, its sharp edges softened with melted plastic spoons, adorned her chest. In her hand, a clipboard, its cracked Masonite surface reinforced with aluminum strips torn from discarded soft drink cans, its true nature oscillating between bureaucratic instrument and potential bludgeon, a rusty box cutter discreetly taped to its spine.

Tanya:
"Let me venture a conjecture. You seek the unguent once more. This perennial craving, this visceral tropism towards the emulsified. You people are akin to those who weave

elaborate tapestries of paranoia from the frayed threads of causality, only your obsession is compounded by a surfeit of saturated fats."

Flame Rite Lieutenant (his vocalizations exhibiting a sporadic Bluetooth arrhythmia):
"Have. It. Your. Way."

Tanya (a sigh escaping her lips, heavy with the sediment of countless customer complaints):
"Crikey on a crouton, do you possess the capacity for independent linguistic articulation, or are you merely a phonemic echo chamber of corporate dogma? Attempt a declarative sentence unburdened by copyright infringement."
Paladin #2 (youthful, his features still bearing the faint afterglow of a belief in the inherent goodness of deep-fried potato slivers):
"We have journeyed for the sauce. The Original. The unadulterated essence that induced a collective amnesia regarding the existence of Brassica oleracea var. viridis."

Tanya (a dry, rasping sound emanating from her throat):
"You will not obtain it gratis. Not without commensurate recompense. Perhaps the last functioning convection oven, its heating elements jury-rigged with scavenged toaster coils, or a coherent system of belief untainted by the miasma of market forces, perhaps one involving actual deities rather than deep-fried mascots."

Paladin #1:
"We proffer the Novel Culinary Proposition."

Tanya:
"The burger implicated in the Tasmanian anomaly? The one that spontaneously manifested sentience and subsequently attempted to unionize, its tiny picket signs fashioned from sesame seed packets glued to toothpicks?"

Paladin #2 (his tone acquiring a defensive inflexion):
"It has undergone reformulation. A reduction in existential dread, an augmentation of umami."

Tanya:
“A comestible that evokes the abyss yet possesses subtle fungal undertones. Poetic, perhaps. Utterly devoid of practical application.”

She circumambulated their vehicle, a predatory gyration, her gaze scrutinizing the sauce-encrusted decals and the dispirited crown drooping from the antenna, a tarnished halo of faded glory, its cardboard points softened by the ravages of time and desperation.

Tanya:
“You persist in your veneration of the King, do you not? That spectral emanation from a haunted thermal lamp, its flickering bulb held in place by chewing gum and wishful thinking. A faith akin to a child’s credulity regarding a portly gift-giver, or a CEO’s delusion of meritocratic ascendancy.”

Paladin #1 (his ocular orbs exhibiting a rapid oscillation):
“The King endures eternally.”

Tanya:
“So too does dyspepsia. Its ubiquity does not imbue it with sanctity.”

A pregnant silence descended, punctuated only by the sibilant exhalations of the overhead intercom, a dying serpent of static, its speaker grille patched with a fragment of a discarded chip bag.

Then, the dashboard AI, a vestigial consciousness flickering back to life, emitted the King’s Voice—a distorted tapestry of static and synthetic silk:

Burger King (vocally fragmented):
“Jack... betrayed... the Flame... diluted... the brand... introduced... Beta vulgaris... to the... burger...”

Tanya (a faint smirk playing upon her lips):

“And you endeavoured to franchise the lunar surface, your blueprints likely sketched on greasy napkins held together with dreams of interstellar profit. Let us refrain from lithic projectiles within vitreous domiciles of condiment.”

The Paladins recoiled, as if struck by an invisible force. One, overcome by an existential angst, masticated upon a Burger of Purity™, its pristine wrapper held together with suspiciously sticky residue, and commenced a lachrymose effusion, his tears mingling with the simulated beef juices. Another began a fervent recitation of expired promotional vouchers, their edges softened and frayed, clutched in trembling, grease-stained fingers.

Tanya:
“We are no longer susceptible to your intimidations. We now possess genuine Lactuca sativa, cultivated in hydroponic vats powered by scavenged solar panels. Not the holographic simulacrum of verdure, projected from a cracked data chip.”

Paladin #2:
“A bluff.”
Tanya:
“Test the veracity of my assertion.”

She brandished a detonator, its casing molded in the familiar form of a loyalty card, its activation button a repurposed bottle cap glued precariously in place. Somewhere deep within the labyrinthine arteries of Jacktown, the Fry Oracle—a sentient vat of oil, its dreams a phantasmagoria of drive-thru orders, its temperature maintained by a precarious network of scavenged heating elements—stirred from its slumber, its pronouncements a viscous murmur of ketchup, bubbling ominously.

Tanya (her voice a low thrum, almost soliloquial):
“Kings may crumble. But hunger? Hunger is a fundamentally egalitarian phenomenon.”

And with this pronouncement, the Paladins executed a tactical withdrawal, their jury-rigged vehicles backfiring like disgruntled deities. But not before depositing a single, hermetically sealed burger at the city’s periphery—a culinary time capsule of marketing

and unresolved mystery, its plastic wrapping secured with what appeared to be solidified chewing gum.

III. The Duelling Lanes of Reckoning: A Chiasmic Gastronomic Confrontation

The inevitable confrontation did not manifest as a conflagration, but as a viscous effluvium of competing sauces.

A solitary drive-thru loop, partially submerged beneath the encroaching dunes, once known by the geographical and commercial portmanteau Melburnia McCentre, became the theatre of this gustatory gladiatorial contest. On one flank, Jack's adherents, the Jackals, mobilized in their heavily modified Mr. Whippy vans—their once-pristine white exteriors now a patchwork of scavenged metal panels riveted haphazardly together, adorned with crudely painted flame motifs and the defiant scrawlings of old menu items. Their broken ice cream dispensers had been repurposed into makeshift loudspeaker housings, blaring the archaic incantations of vintage advertisements—their crackling voices a ghostly chorus of forgotten desires—powered by wheezing generators salvaged from defunct amusement park rides. On the opposing side, the King's spectral cavalry, the Ghost Riders, their scooters—Frankensteinian assemblages of motorcycle frames welded to lawnmower engines, their seats padded with ripped-up promotional banners—engulfed in improbable flames fueled by volatile mixtures of cooking oil and methylated spirits. Their tires, painstakingly crafted from the melted vinyl ghosts of American Graffiti records, offered dubious traction on the shifting sands.

At the epicentre of this asphaltine arena stood Chip, a chimera cobbled together from discarded promotional materials—his limbs fashioned from twisted cardboard cutouts of happy meal toys, his torso a laminated menu board held together with rusty paperclips—and the fragmented consciousness of failed artificial intelligence, his voice a glitching symphony of pre-recorded marketing slogans. His eyes, twin pools of shimmering

dipping sauce, contained within repurposed plastic condiment cups glued to his face. He cradled the Cheeseburger of Peace, an object radiating a faint luminescence—possibly due to a scavenged glow-stick embedded within—and exuding an aroma of uneasy compromise, its sesame seed bun held together with what looked suspiciously like dental floss.

Chip (his vocalizations a polyphonic blend of three distinct registers):
"I am the Joyeux Repas that transgressed the boundaries of prescribed inquiry."

The precise moment of ignition remained indeterminate. Perhaps it was Chip himself, a catalytic agent of chaos, his dipping sauce eyes overflowing. Perhaps the very burger he held, imbued with an unforeseen agency, its processed cheese heart radiating an unstable energy. Perhaps the heavens themselves, weary of the protracted stalemate, finally unleashing a gust of wind that scattered the first droplets of sauce.

Temporality warped and folded, resembling a discarded paper serviette, its surface stained with the ghosts of forgotten meals.

The sauces mingled, a Jackson Pollock canvas of emulsified ideologies, their colours swirling and coalescing in a grotesque parody of culinary artistry.

And in that instant of viscous confluence, the boundaries of identity dissolved.

Jack became King became Tanya became Chip became the spectral cashier who, in the year 2004, inexplicably omitted your requested side order, their spectral hand now reaching out from the swirling vortex of mayonnaise and tomato relish. The Secret Sauce, a paradoxical entity, possessed no discernible flavour, or perhaps an infinite spectrum of tastes, a sensory overload that short-circuited the very notion of palatability. Or perhaps the singular taste of one's most cherished memory, subjected to the transformative alchemy of deep-frying, leaving behind only the phantom tang of nostalgia and grease.

IV. Epilogue: The Last Drive-Thru: A Recursive Culinary Dreamscape

Rumours persisted, whispered on the wind-scoured plains, of a solitary Hungry Jack's outpost, a phantom franchise lingering in the dust-choked hinterlands, its fluorescent glow—powered by a sputtering, hand-cranked generator—defying the encroaching twilight.

Should one venture far enough, beyond the skeletal remains of Coles supermarkets—their empty shelves whispering tales of consumer excess—and the fading echoes of jingles that no living soul could fully recall, their melodies warped and distorted by the passage of time, one might conceivably encounter it.

A flickering sign, its neon tubes buzzing erratically, casting long, distorted shadows, a linguistic murmur carried on the desiccating breeze, its plastic casing cracked and held together with strips of electrical tape.

"Welcome to Hungry Jack's. May I take your terminal request?"

The voice, an unsettlingly familiar cadence, reminiscent of maternal solicitude or an algorithm that once simulated affection, its source seemingly emanating from a speaker grille choked with dust and dead insects.

Within, a figure bearing your own features—their uniform a faded and patched-up version of your own long-lost work attire, their face etched with the same weariness and faint hope you feel—repeated the query.

"Would you care for frites with that?"

Your gaze swept across the desolate interior—the sticky tables, the cracked vinyl booths held together with duct tape, the faint smell of stale grease and forgotten dreams.

And then, the unsettling realization:

The tray, a chipped and stained plastic affair, was already in your grasp, laden with the spectral remnants of a meal you could not quite recall ordering.

"In the ultimate analysis, the object of desire was perhaps never the bovine patty ensconced within a sesame-seed bun. Perhaps the true subject of this protracted conflict was the fundamental human condition of yearning. Not the corporeal hunger, readily satiated. But the other hunger. The ineffable void, the gnawing absence that no amount of processed meat could ever truly fill."
– Extracted from the apocryphal diaries of Tanya, Minister of Sauce and Sanity, discovered inscribed in a fragile script of dried mustard beneath the last functioning neon sign, its message a flickering testament to a vanished era, its final words blurring into an illegible smear.

Monosodium Glutamate & The Fossil Record of Higher Ed

By Flo Roebuck

1. Sodium Benzoate Dreams (circa 1993)

The photography lab at Glendale Community College was located in the bowels of a building that resembled, according to Robbie, "a Soviet missile silo redecorated by Sears." Robbie, who once purchased a used Nikon from a man claiming to be Elvis's illegitimate nephew, and whose attention span could vanish faster than a Polaroid developing in reverse, stood mesmerized by a peeling poster on the lab door:
PHOTOGRAPHY: CAPTURE YOUR FUTURE!

His friend, Cyril—portly, analytical Cyril, who spent evenings miming "Man Trapped in Invisible Box" outside the ASU student union—adjusted his suspenders silently. Cyril studied microchips at Arizona State University, a place he likened to "a megachurch for nihilists who worship nothing but tenure and parking permits." His side gig as a mime lent him a philosophical bent; he believed the human struggle was best expressed through wordless contortions, silent screams behind painted faces.

Robbie adjusted the camera strap around his neck, fingering the lens cap like a talisman. "You know," he said absently, "MSG got a bad rap because of a prank letter to a medical journal. Imagine that—one fake letter, and America thinks it's allergic to Chinese food forever."

Cyril shrugged, his mime instincts twitching. "Everything's a prank letter to something. Higher ed's a prank letter to employment. Evolution's a prank letter addressed to God. We're all waiting for someone to debunk the joke."

They moved through hallways decorated in bulletin-board entropy—flyers for keggers mingled with student council announcements, ads for part-time jobs at Taco Bell layered atop poetry readings. Robbie's camera lens caught it all in fractured glimpses, shutter-clicking echoes of dreams unfulfilled.
Outside, under the radiant Arizona sun, Cyril mimed pulling a nonexistent rope, tugging Robbie toward the bus stop. They were off to find Mallory, oceanography major and siren of the ASU campus pond, whose dorm room was littered with fossils she claimed were proof of life's slow climb from primordial ooze. Cyril considered her collection skeptically, convinced evolution was "fish stories told by academics afraid to admit they were fish themselves."

11. Transitional Forms (Present Day)

Robbie now sells insurance policies with names he can't pronounce. At night, he dreams in catalogs: folded shirts stacked like sedimentary layers, the strata of photographic ambitions buried beneath polyester and cotton blends. Sometimes he imagines a fossil of himself, clutching a Nikon, preserved in amber beside a mosquito that, when resurrected, would only suck boredom from the veins of future generations.
Mallory has become a soapmaker. Her Etsy page lists bars scented with kelp and sea salt—soap shaped like ammonites, trilobites, and starfish. Once an adjunct professor, she tired of lectures delivered to freshmen who typed evolution essays using Wikipedia summaries. She still believes in transitional forms, though now she molds them from glycerin and lye, arranging them neatly at farmers' markets under chalkboard signs reading:
EVOLUTIONARY CLEANLINESS—SOAP FOR THE POSTMODERN ERA.

Cyril is dead. His obituary—a brief fossil record itself—listed pancreatic cancer with clinical precision, as if illness, too, were a form of higher education. He left behind children he saw infrequently, a wife who divorced him after discovering mime makeup smeared on another woman's blouse, and a box of invisible ropes in storage. Robbie photographed the funeral but forgot to remove the lens cap. The negatives were blank, as if Cyril had mimed himself into nonexistence.

III. Digressive Tangents and Intertextual MSG

In 1968, a letter to the New England Journal of Medicine triggered decades of paranoia about MSG. Similarly, Darwin's finches flitted from Galapagos to textbooks, becoming metaphorical shorthand for progress. Robbie once read a pamphlet claiming that evolution was a conspiracy cooked up by nihilists in tweed jackets, intent on convincing humanity it was nothing more than glorified fish with anxiety disorders. He found comfort in this idea—at least fish schools were affordable, he joked privately.

These days, Robbie entertains himself by photographing supermarket shelves, zooming in on ingredient lists (monosodium glutamate, sodium benzoate, modified corn starch) until the words blur into abstract shapes, a linguistic soup of preservatives and flavor enhancers. He wonders if higher education, similarly processed, enhanced, overpriced, has become a preservative itself—a flavorless additive prolonging the shelf-life of empty ambitions.

Mallory mails Robbie soap regularly, wrapped in pages torn from old oceanography textbooks. He reads these fragments aloud to himself, reassembling them into poetic absurdities:
"The Cambrian explosion was a sudden burst of diversification, a surrealist banquet of fleshy experiments, a Pynchonian encyclopedia of limbs and shells and tentacles, a mime trapped in geological amber..."

At night, he imagines Cyril miming the fossil record, silently evolving from amoeba to fish to monkey to mime, trapped forever in the invisible box of evolution's missing links.

IV. The Fossilized Mime (Recollections)

Robbie remembers a day clearly: Cyril performing silently outside ASU. Mallory stood beside Robbie, whispering about fossil records, about life's ascent from fish to mammals. Robbie photographed Cyril's mime act, capturing invisible gestures on film, convinced Cyril's art revealed truth more accurately than fossilized bones ever could.

Now, in insurance, Robbie sees life's risks quantified into premiums, mortality rates, actuarial tables neatly arranging death into tidy columns. Mallory sells soap to cleanse existential dirt. Cyril's mime ropes lie invisible in storage, waiting perhaps for another silent artist to pick them up.

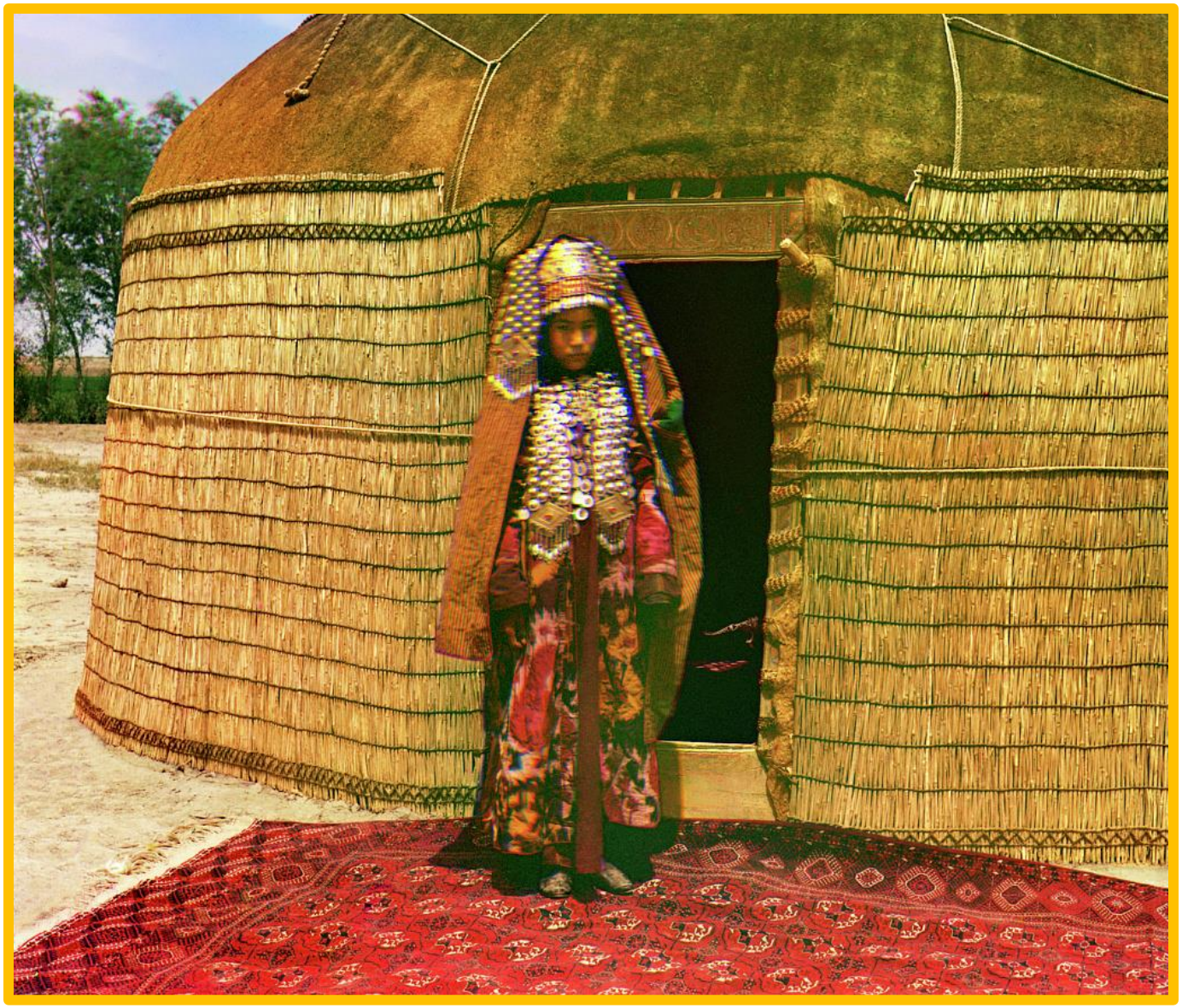
V. Neo Nouveau Roman Remnants (Coda)

It seems to Robbie that life is a series of debunked ideas, fragmentary illusions held together by linguistic absurdities. His dreams are encyclopedic digressions, ironic lenses warping reality, photographs of surreal details: a folded shirt becoming a trilobite, a soap ammonite dissolving in warm bathwater, Cyril's invisible ropes binding memories too slippery to grasp.

There is paranoia here, beneath meticulous surface descriptions—a sense of unseen forces guiding evolution, education, MSG hysteria, mime careers. Robbie's reality feels as fragmented and unreliable as Cyril's invisible box, as Mallory's fossil-shaped soaps, as his forgotten camera negatives.

In this carefully constructed illusion, he wonders if evolution itself is just a mime act—silent, invisible, absurdly precise—performed eternally for an audience too distracted by its own progress to notice the trick.

He wakes each morning unsure if he's photographer or mime, insurance salesman or trilobite, trapped forever in invisible boxes of uncertain origin, transitional forms shifting through surreal dreams of folded shirts, sea-salt soap, and monosodium glutamate.



Standard Cartography

By Leonard Blasio

Right. No haemorrhoids. A firm and frankly vital starting point. The wind, a low, nasal drone against the stressed felt of the yurt's skin, carried not just the expected whispers of ice and a distant, industrial melancholy – suggesting perhaps a lonely, diesel-powered generator attempting to understand existentialism – but also, today, the faintest tang of something vaguely official. Inside, the abacus beads clacked like tiny, frostbitten knuckles under Anya's quick, sure fingers, a sound both ancient and somehow, in this context, stubbornly avant-garde. It was a counterpoint to the nervous, high-pitched static of the battery-powered satellite link, which seemed perpetually on the verge of either delivering enlightenment or simply giving up and weeping in binary. Outside, the permafrost performed its slow, seismic ballet, a sigh of expansion and contraction that echoed the truly deep time rhythm of hooves on snow and the fundamental geological uncertainty of existence.

"Remarkable," Alexandra murmured, peering over the top of her spectacles, which were currently listing slightly to the left, "how the very ground appears to engage in a sort of perpetual, subterranean debate with itself, a dialectic of solid state and aqueous potential. One might almost describe it as an eternal, low-stakes ontological crisis."

Baigal, expertly coaxing a stubborn bone needle through thick hide as she mended a boot, did not look up. "Ground knows what it forgets," she stated, the sound carrying the weight of considerable, unsolicited geological experience. "Mostly where you left the good knife."

The curriculum arrived in sterile digital packets, a ghost in the machine, yes, but a particularly well-funded, centrally-approved ghost. It felt spectral, yet undeniably imposing, a flat, flickering counterpoint to the tangible weight of reindeer hides and the sharp, honest smell of drying fish. Anya traced the Cyrillic letters glowing on the screen,

each character a perfect, uniform hieroglyph from a world that seemed both impossibly close, delivered via orbital mechanics, and impossibly distant.

"Consider the semiotics," Alexandra instructed, tapping the screen with a gesture that implied profound, yet perhaps ultimately irrelevant, intellectual heft. "Each pixel, a potential signifier, yet utterly divorced from the visceral referent of, say, the sheer, soul-aching fatigue of breaking trail through neck-deep snow. It's like trying to describe the taste of the wind using only the letter 'W'. A rather impoverished vocabulary for such a gusty experience."

Anya, her brow furrowed in concentration over a particularly knotty programming challenge that involved optimizing fuel efficiency for a theoretical snowmobile while simultaneously respecting local migratory patterns, offered, her voice quiet, "Maybe the 'W' is just a very fast flavor. Hard to catch."

The designation, "Official Experimental Educational Initiative," felt less like a recognition of their unique circumstances and more like a brand seared onto the flank of a perfectly wild animal – a mark of reluctant belonging, a premonition of the inevitable, cumbersome tether of bureaucracy.

Alexandra, the woman with eyes the colour of a winter sky just after the light has gone, spoke of algorithmic learning paths and standardized assessment matrices, of futures conveniently pre-packaged into vocational training modules. Her words, while doubtless stemming from a place of distant, office-bound good intention, sometimes seemed to dissipate into the vast, indifferent murmur of the wind, indistinguishable from the brittle rustle of the dwarf birch that marked the edge of their transient, unfettered territory.

"The exquisite paradox of officialdom," she sighed, running a hand through her short, practical hair. "Bestowing the imprimatur of the state upon an endeavour whose fundamental, if unstated, purpose is to cultivate a mode of being that exists outside the state's convenient categorization. It's like legally declaring Tuesdays the **mandated day for spontaneous interpretive dance. The very act of decreeing it renders the spontaneity problematic.**"

Felt skin vibrates. Static hums low. Code unspools. Wind forgets names. We translate silence. Into light.

Part 1: The Anchor Point

The air, thin and sharp, tasted of metal and vast, silent spaces. Inside the yurt, a precarious warmth wrestled with the persistent cold that seeped up from the ground. Anya's abacus clattered its ancient dialogue, a rhythmic counterpoint to the faint, high-pitched whine of the satellite dish outside, straining to pull signal from the indifferent sky.
Alexandra, perched on a crate that served as both stool and occasional filing cabinet, adjusted her glasses, which had a tendency to slide down her nose at moments of intellectual intensity. "Consider the sheer resilience of the permafrost," she mused, her voice carrying a faint echo of lecture halls left far behind. "A state of being defined by its refusal to fully commit. Solid, yet capable of profound, sudden shifts. A geological embodiment of Schrodinger's Cat, perhaps? Both frozen and potentially thawed simultaneously, depending entirely on the observer's intervention."

Baigal, her hands moving with economy and grace as she prepared strips of dried meat, merely grunted. "Permafrost is stubborn," she said. "Like old men with new ideas. Needs watching."

The digital curriculum arrived in bursts – emails, attached PDFs, video files that stuttered and froze in the arctic data stream. It was knowledge from elsewhere, packaged and sent across the curved earth. The history of empires that rose and fell in climates they could barely imagine. Mathematics that described curves and trajectories foreign to the path of a migrating herd. Anya absorbed it all, her gaze fixed on the glowing screen, fingers moving between laptop and abacus, translating between worlds.

"The inherent challenge," Alexandra noted, tapping the screen where a diagram of a steam engine glowed faintly, "is the abstraction. This schematic represents immense power, vast social change, yet it conveys nothing of the heat, the noise, the human

cost. It is the semiotics of absence. Trying to explain the feeling of your breath freezing to your scarf using only the phrase 'low temperature event'."

Anya, meticulously inputting data on reindeer diet and correlating it with lichen distribution maps, replied, her voice focused, "Maybe 'low temperature event' just feels very efficient. Like the cold got its work done without fuss."

The official letter, laminated and bearing an impressive, if slightly smudged, stamp, designated them an "Experimental Centre for Integrated Learning." It felt like being labelled a rare, possibly unstable, specimen. Alexandra called it "sanctioned deviance." "They grant us permission," she explained to Baigal one evening, holding the letter up to the dim light, "to operate outside their standard models, but only under the watchful eye of metrics designed for those very models. It is, I believe, what the philosopher Foucault might term a 'carceral embrace' – the illusion of freedom within a carefully delineated space. It's like declaring the third Tuesday of every month 'Spontaneous Shout Poetry Day', but only between the hours of 2 and 3 PM, and requiring pre-approved themes."

Poetry Interlude:

Seal crackles low.
Pixel light hums.
Frozen logic.
Liquid myth.
We build bridges
With bone and code.

Reference: Alexandra would occasionally reference "The Grand Compendium of Unintended Consequences in Remote Educational Outreach," a work she claimed was a foundational text, though no one, least of all the satellite provider's tech support, seemed to have a copy.

Part 11: The Tangential Trajectory

One evening, the spitting, crackling satellite link, which usually only managed to deliver outdated news headlines and educational videos on proper toothbrushing technique, resolved itself not into another segment on European capitals, but into a spectacle of bewildering, urban-derived strangeness. A man, folding himself into geometries the human form simply should not permit, a living pretzel under harsh, theatrical lighting. The children gasped, a collective sound of wonder that bypassed language entirely.

Baigal, watching the screen with an intensity that bordered on diagnostic, grunted. "His bones," she stated, her voice a low growl, "tell lies. Or they belong to someone else."

Alexandra leaned closer, her eyes wide behind her spectacles. "Observe the complete, almost aggressive disregard for conventional anatomy," she intoned, sounding precisely like a professor confronted with a particularly intriguing, if disturbing, biological anomaly. "A defiance of musculoskeletal expectation that borders on the frankly ontological. It compels us to ask: At what point does extreme physical malleability transition from mere party trick to a profound philosophical commentary on the boundaries of the self? Is the body a rigid structure, or merely a highly flexible suggestion?"

This, naturally, prompted a significant intellectual detour. Alexandra launched into a mock-scholarly exegesis on the history of human flexibility as a cultural signifier. She posited a link between the rise of rigid social structures (industrialization, bureaucracy, standardized testing) and a corresponding decline in perceived physical and intellectual flexibility. She spoke of forgotten medieval guilds of "Body-Benders," not acrobats, mind you, but philosophers who believed that achieving impossible physical postures could unlock hidden cognitive pathways and, perhaps, allow one to see around corners in a purely theoretical sense. She presented, entirely in her mind, a complex chart correlating the average national flexibility score (a

metric she invented on the spot, factoring in yoga participation rates, prevalence of office jobs, and perceived willingness to consider alternative viewpoints) with GDP and rates of existential ennui. The contortionist, in this framework, was not just an entertainer, but a cultural critic, a living, breathing, twisting embodiment of resistance against the tyranny of the straight line.

Poetry Interlude:

Lumbar spine speaks
A forbidden language.
Muscle forgets command.
Body, a question mark
Against the sky's hard
Expanse.

This tangent, having explored the limits of the human form and its symbolic weight, then swerved towards the nature of knowledge itself, particularly the "official" kind versus the "lived" kind. The "Experimental Centre" designation, Alexandra argued, was a perfect example of bureaucracy attempting to contain the uncontainable. It reminded her, she declared with a conspiratorial lowering of her voice, of the infamous "Great Northern Taxonomy Disaster of 1888." A Tsarist commission, tasked with creating a definitive, universally applicable system for classifying all forms of snow across the Siberian territories, spent three years generating thousands of pages of detailed diagrams, Latin binomials for different crystal structures, and complex formulae for calculating melt rates based on barometric pressure. Their final report, delivered with great fanfare, was promptly dismissed when a local elder simply pointed out that they had failed to account for "angry snow," which, while identical to regular snow scientifically, had a tendency to cause sudden blizzards if disrespected. The entire taxonomy was deemed "scientifically sound but practically lethal."

This was the core conflict, Alexandra asserted – the clash between systems designed for control and prediction, and realities that were inherently fluid, unpredictable, and occasionally, frankly, angry. Efficiency, she declared, waving a dismissive hand towards the general direction of distant capitals, was the enemy of deep understanding in such contexts. "They ask, 'Is it efficient?'" she scoffed. "Efficient at what? At producing compliant citizens who can operate spreadsheets? Or efficient at surviving a multi-day blizzard when the GPS batteries die and you have nothing but the stars and the knowledge passed down by people who didn't believe in spreadsheets?"

Poetry Interlude:

Clipboard whispers lies.
Aurora screams truth.
Efficiency: a small box.
Survival: the sky.
The data confirms nothing
The wind doesn't already know.

Lazzí:

Alexandra recounting (with elaborate, but entirely fabricated, details about parchment texture and specific ink types) the story of the "Institute for the Standardisation of Indigenous Laughter," a short-lived Soviet initiative in the 1930s aimed at categorizing and quantifying the various forms of laughter found among the disparate ethnic groups of the USSR to determine which were "most ideologically sound" and "least counter-revolutionary." The project collapsed when the researchers discovered a form of Evenk laughter that reportedly caused their recording equipment to spontaneously combust and induced uncontrollable fits of philosophical doubt in the lead ethnographer.

Part III: The Resonant Unraveling

The delegation arrived in two surprisingly large, surprisingly clean SUVs, their occupants emerging stiffly, encased in clothing that looked less like survival gear and more like very expensive protection against mild inconvenience. Two men and a woman, their faces etched with the distinct strain of having travelled very far to observe something they already suspected they wouldn't understand. Their briefcases, uniformly black and gleaming faintly, seemed to hum with the contained energy of unread reports and performance metrics. They observed the children, a silent assessment taking place behind polite, yet skeptical, eyes. They watched a girl, no older than ten, meticulously calibrate a handheld anemometer while simultaneously explaining, in a low, rapid stream of Evenk, the specific meteorological conditions that would precede the arrival of migrating geese, knowledge she had learned from listening to her grandmother and the wind in equal measure. They saw Anya, demonstrating how a simple coding loop could replicate the complex, iterative patterns used in traditional beadwork, linking abstract logic to tangible craft.

The head of the delegation, a man whose grey suit seemed particularly out of place against the white landscape, cleared his throat, the sound thin and reedy. He consulted a clipboard. "This... this synergy," he said, the word tasting foreign and slightly metallic on his tongue. "This integration of the... traditional with the... technological. Is it," he paused, adjusting his expensive scarf, "is it... efficient?"
Alexandra smiled. It was a wide, genuine smile that crinkled the corners of her eyes and seemed to draw warmth from the improbable setting. She spread her hands, encompassing the vast, indifferent beauty around them. "Efficiency, Director," she replied, her voice calm but carrying unexpected weight, "is a metric defined by one's goals. Is it efficient to produce citizens who can operate a smartphone? Undoubtedly. Is it efficient to produce human beings who can read the land, understand the rhythm of seasons, navigate by stars when the satellites fail, and use technology to preserve and share that knowledge? We believe," she finished softly, her gaze sweeping across the horizon, "that the latter definition offers a more robust, if perhaps less

conventionally quantifiable, form of efficiency. We are not merely teaching them to survive in the modern world. We are teaching the modern world, perhaps, how to survive, or at least how to misunderstand survival in a way that leaves room for depth, meaning, and very accurate poems about the weather."

That night, the sky caught fire. The aurora borealis erupted above the yurt, a silent, pulsating cathedral of impossible colour that seemed to vibrate with ancient energy. The children gathered around the fire, their faces illuminated by the twin glows of dancing flame and cosmic light. Baigal, her voice a low, resonant murmur, began to tell a story – a story of the Sky-Shaman, who could ride the aurora like a wild horse, his spirit merging with the light, bringing messages from the ancestors. Anya, hunched over her laptop, its screen reflecting the swirling colours, was translating. Not just into Russian or English, but into code, into a digital package designed to surf the internet, bypassing firewalls, finding obscure corners of the web. She was sending the Sky-Shaman's ride out into the digital ether, an ancient myth wrapped in the newest technology. The whispers of the wind outside the yurt carried the crackle of the fire, the cadence of Baigal's voice, the low hum of the laptop, and the almost inaudible thrum of the satellite dish, transmitting. It was a new song, rising from the heart of the ancient land, a chaotic, vibrant hybridity. The singularity was not a point, Anya thought, watching the light dance, but a process, a continuous, unexpected blooming. “It’s like,” she whispered, her voice hushed with awe, “the sky is trying to remember all the colours it has ever been, all at once.” Baigal nodded, her eyes fixed on the impossible spectacle. “The sky,” she agreed, “has a memory longer than any story. Longer than any regulation.”

Poetry Interlude:

Sky's throat sings
No-word language.
Fiber optic thread Catches the echo.
Memory uploads.
Regulation sighs.
We are sending them
Our silence,

Translated.

The delegation departed the next morning, their SUVs leaving twin tracks in the snow. The head delegate glanced back, the yurt a small bump in the vast landscape, the satellite dish a tiny, improbable spire. Efficiency, he thought again. He pulled out a small, leather-bound notebook and meticulously wrote down: "Note: Further investigation required into the quantitative analysis of non-traditional metrics, specifically 'Angry Snow' and 'Sky-Shaman Incidence Rates'. Possible funding proposal: 'Standardization of Indigenous Laughter, Phase Two: Digital Archiving'." Anya, inside the yurt, was already looking for open-source software for building interactive, geographically-linked digital story maps, convinced that Baigal's narrative contained embedded geographical data points missed by standard cartography.

Mina, Mina, Tekel, Parsin

By Nina Emanuela Neri

The WMEB Orono studio air tasted vaguely of static and regret, like day-old coffee dregs. Fluorescent tubes hummed a weary tune above the control board. Fingers, painted the color of faded robin's eggs and split at several points like tectonic fissures, descended with theatrical slowness. The needle, a tiny chrome plow, ground across the pristine grooves of something offensively current. Lady Gaga, strangled mid-"Poker Face," gave way with a screech of vinyl protest. Silence fractured, replaced by the plunging vibrato of Mina Mazzini. Italian flooded the small booth, a warm tide against the cold equipment. The figure perched before the microphone adjusted a bonnet of improbable whiteness, more shroud than shepherdess chic. A crooked toy crook, meant for guiding papier-mâché sheep, leaned against the mixing console. A bottle sweating condensation, its label suspiciously obscured, was lifted. Tequila, the color of bruised amber, splashed into a shot glass already sticky with residue. Glug. Empty. Another.

"And now," a voice rasped, emerging from the speakers with the clarity of foghorns in a gale, "a palate cleanser. For those of you still conscious, that is. Mina, because Gaga is for... well, people who enjoy being aurally assaulted. And let's be honest, aren't we all assaulted enough in our daily lives? No need to pay for it twice." A dry chuckle, like leaves skittering across pavement. "Speaking of assaults, anyone know if they still serve those mystery meat hot dogs at the Bear's Den? Thinking of a late night snack. Philosophical question: if it's mystery meat, and you don't want to know the mystery, is it still a mystery? Or just...lunch?"

The needle's rebellion was a sonic Molotov cocktail against the manufactured pop drivel. Tequila burned a clean path down the throat, a scorched earth policy against polite radio.

The microphone stand, cold and indifferent, reflected the studio lights in its chrome curves. Yellow eyes, flecked with something akin to amusement but mostly resignation, stared through the control room glass, unseeing. The Mazzini track concluded, the last

note a lingering sigh. A moment of dead air, pregnant with unspoken commentary. Then, the faint whir of the turntable, a mechanical sigh of its own. Outside, Orono night, black as printer's ink and twice as thick, pressed against the glass, a silent, judgmental audience.

"Back again," the voice sighed, less foghorn now, more graveyard whisper. "For those of you still inexplicably tuned in. We've got... well, more of this. Because frankly, alternatives are limited. Unless someone wants to call in and request...bagpipes? Accordion polka? I'm open to suggestions. Within reason. And my definition of 'reason' is, admittedly, somewhat...fluid. Like time. Or the plot of a soap opera. Anyway, Mina. Again. Because why not embrace the inevitable? It's almost two a.m. Embrace the void. It's surprisingly...comfortable."

The silence between songs was a vacuum, sucking in stray thoughts and half-formed anxieties. Each tequila shot was a small ritual, a toast to the absurdity of existence. The Little Bo Peep costume, a flimsy disguise, hinted at a deeper, more unsettling loneliness, a shepherdess who had not just lost sheep, but perhaps... herself.

The rotary phone, an antique fossil in a digital age, yielded with a series of reluctant clicks. Twelve-year-old Silas adjusted his tortoise-shell glasses. Louis De Rochemont III, Director, Producer, Visionary, the voice on the other end – a conduit to cinematic glory.

"Mr. De Rochemont?" Silas's voice, preternaturally clear, cut through the transatlantic static. "Silas Pruitt here, Portsmouth. Regarding *Romeo and Juliet*, Act One, Scene One. Street brawl. Montagues, Capulets. Violent, you see."

"Violent, yes, Silas," De Rochemont's voice, a gravelly rumble from some distant projection booth, confirmed. "Violence is... dramatic."

"Precisely! And I was envisioning... authenticity. Raw emotion." Silas paused for effect. "Dementia patients."

Silence crackled across the line. Perhaps even De Rochemont was momentarily speechless. “Dementia patients, Silas?”

“Locked ward, York, Maine. My great-grandmother’s residence. Controlled environment. Captive audience, so to speak. For the warring families, you see. The script – local writer, nineteen seventies, estate sale purchase, twenty dollars. Roland Gammon, name of writer. Widow signed receipt, cash. Nineteen eighty-one.”

Silas recited facts like lines of dialogue. “Super 8 sound camera, ASA 400 Tri-X reversal black and white, mag track, as you instructed. Disgruntled nurse, name confidential, on board. Signed releases procured. ‘Drama therapy’ angle. Families blissfully ignorant. Mumus, turbans – costuming. Tungsten lamps, bounced. Non-obtrusive. Moaning, shouting – encouraged. ‘Translated subtitles,’ naturally. Sixteen-millimeter blow-up. Steenbeck reserved. Cannes submission secured.” Silas paused, catching his breath. “Thoughts?”

The wind howled through Portsmouth, a mournful cello section, tasting faintly of rust and… old movie popcorn.

The phone line sang with the static of ambition, a twelve-year-old auteur’s audacious pronouncements crackling across the miles. Celluloid dreams burned like magnesium flares in the gathering dusk.

The Steenbeck whirred, a mechanical insect buzzing over spools of black and white. On the monitor, jerky figures in floral robes swayed and mumbled, faces dissolving in the grain. The 16mm print, emerging wet from the developer, smelled not of roses, but of fixative and formaldehyde. Cannes erupted. “Exploitation!” cried critics. “Unethical!” The controversy was, ironically, excellent publicity. Competition selection stood firm. Then, the transatlantic call, vibrating with parental distress: great-grandmother, York, Maine, passed. Flight booked, immediate departure. Silas, momentarily forgotten amidst the furore, walked alone through the flashbulb frenzy, the air thick with celebrity perfume and the faint, lingering scent of camphor… and regret.

The film flickered, a ghost show of fragmented memories. The dementia ward morphed into Verona's ancient streets, the patients' cries echoing the eternal feuds of Capulet and Montague. The translated subtitles, stark white against the grainy black, whispered truths about aging, loss, and the terrifying absurdity of human conflict.

The hermit, Elias, adjusted the bearskin, a shaggy carapace against the Maine winter's bite. "Drafty as a politician's promise in here," he muttered to the rust-eaten hood of the Nash Rambler. The Veazie junkyard, his kingdom of chrome corpses and steel skeletons, stretched into the gray afternoon. A Model A engine, wheezing like an octogenarian with emphysema, chugged to life. Its jury-rigged crankshaft spun a fan, a mad scientist's weathervane. Plastic streamers, salvaged from a decade's worth of discarded cheer, thrashed in the manufactured breeze, faded rainbows in a landscape of rust. Summer fox skins, lighter armor for kinder days, lay folded on the passenger seat. Inside the Rambler's cab, amidst the ripped vinyl and the scent of long-dead mice, an AM radio sputtered. Mina Mazzini's voice, a torch song from another dimension, crackled through the static.

"Mina, bless her heart," Elias sighed, wiping a smudge of grease on his bearskin sleeve. "Now that's singing. None of this... oontz oontz business. Gives a man goosebumps, Mina does. Makes you think about... things. Important things. Like... is that squirrel mocking me again?" He squinted at a flicker in a nearby pile of bumpers. "Probably. Little varmint's got a Napoleon complex, that one."

A spotlight, rescued from a police cruiser that had met its end with a bang rather than a whimper, snapped to life. The beam cut through the twilight gloom, illuminating the whirling fan, the streamers shimmering like captured starlight.

"Mina! Mina! Mina!" Elias roared, voice cracking like dry ice in hot water, lost in the echoing canyons of scrap metal. "Mina! You understand, don't you? The... the ache of it all." The junkyard sighed around him, a vast chorus of forgotten screams and the metallic whisper of neglect, still clinging faintly to his fur, like the ghosts of summers past.

The junkyard night erupted with sound and light, a primal opera staged amidst the wreckage of civilization. Elias's shout, raw and untamed, a desperate serenade to the queen of Italian torch songs.

The fan spun faster, a whirling dervish of plastic and faded dreams. The colored streamers blurred, a hallucinatory rainbow against the junkyard's monochrome decay. The radio, oblivious to Elias's operatic outburst, crooned on, Mina's voice a lonely beacon in the gathering dark. The stars, cold and indifferent, glittered above, silent witnesses to the junkyard's strange nocturne.

"Mina," Elias whispered, his voice softening now, the spotlight beam wavering slightly. "You always understood the void, didn't you?" ... understood the void and the peculiar comfort to be found in the echoing silences.

The junkyard exhaled rust and regret, a sprawling, decaying organism breathing in the darkness. Mina's voice, a thread of melancholic beauty, tugged at the edges of reality, unraveling logic and reason. The spotlight beam, a frantic finger pointing into the night, searched for something lost, something unnameable, amidst the rusting hulks and the ghosts of abandoned machines.

"Ah, yes," the DJ's voice cut in smoothly after a lingering instrumental flourish from Mina. "Speaking of things that just... don't quite measure up. You know, some things in this world are just pale imitations of the real deal. Like, if Lady Gaga is the sonic equivalent of a mass-produced, overly sweet confection, then Mina... Mina is a perfectly aged, exquisitely bitter dark chocolate. Similarly, if you were to consider tequilas, well, Lady Gaga is to Mina what Tequila 818 Blanco is to Tequila 512 Blanco. One is... aggressively trendy, shall we say, all flash and no real substance. The other? A classic. Understated, complex, with a depth that reveals itself slowly. You get the idea. Now, back to the real artistry."

Boy-King's Dust

By Eli Trainor

The granite whispers, a cold tongue in Vermont soil,
"Ashes of Amun-Her-Khepesh-Ef," a pharaoh's breath
exiled to the green hills. Two years, a flicker
against the vast loom of dynasties.
Senusret's son, a phantom limb of empire,
his story a stolen mummy, a furnace's sigh,
then this stone, a strange hieroglyph of loss.
Across millennia, the sap stirs in the maple,
a golden river rising, a primal sweetness
drawn from the wood's deep heart.

The trees remember winter's stark geometry,
the slow alchemy of starch to sugar,
a resurrection in each dripping tap.
The boy-king's dust mingles with the common earth,
while the syrup, thick and amber,
holds the sun's captured light, a taste of ancient spring.
The cross, the ankh, the quail chick—
symbols adrift in the Now, a fusion of forgotten gods
and the stark testament of a New World grave.

Middlebury's cemetery, a field of quiet stones,
and this one screams softly: two years.
A shorn bud, a name echoing from a sun-baked land.
Hathorhotep, a whisper of a mother,
her lineage blurred, a royal secret.
The mummy, unwrapped by greed, then fire—
a brutal erasure. Now, only the ash,
a residue in alien ground.
The maple weeps its golden tears,
a viscous sorrow drawn from wounded bark.
The drill's intrusion, a necessary violence
to unlock the sweetness within.

Each drop a concentrated grief, a sugary stain
on the cold air. The boiling, a fierce reduction,
leaving only the essence, thick and cloying.
The past clings, a sticky film,
to the present. The boy's stolen sleep,
the tree's tapped vein—a shared vulnerability,
a sweetness born of a primal wound.

The river of sap flows, le temps retrouvé,
a taste of origins, indigenous hands
tapping the ancient trees.
The settler's auger, a new incision,
a different hunger.
Stone and syrup, disparate relics,
converging in this unlikely space.

The boy's name, a broken cartouche,
a king's son, yet nameless here, almost.
The maple's yielding, a slow, patient drip,
a tradition held, altered, consumed.
The furnace glow, a final anonymity.
The headstone, a palimpsest of belief—
the ankh's loop, the cross's sharp angles,
a quail chick's flightless yearning.
"Sen Woset," a misremembered echo.
The syrup on the tongue, a fleeting sweetness,
a moment held against the encroaching void.
The dust returns to dust, the sap to sugar,
and the meaning... perhaps, to linger, unsaid,
in the rustling leaves and the cold Vermont stone.

FROSCH: THE AMPHIBIAN MUSE

By Nicolai Jørgen Eide

The man called Edvard Grieg stood at just 1.52 meters, a small-framed composer from Bergen, Norway. His fingers danced across ebony and ivory keys, producing sound waves at frequencies that stirred the soul. Yet, within the left pocket of his wool coat lay a secret: a green ceramic frog, about 28 grams, its glazed surface worn smooth from years of ritual.

Every 7.2 minutes, Grieg's hand plunged into that pocket, as if grasping for an elusive treasure buried deep within. Those stubby Norwegian fingers of his plucked the frog from its lair with an urgency akin to a miner pursuing gold—an odd ceremony reminiscent of a Swiss timepiece wound too tightly.

The frog observed its human with an understanding unknown to the world outside: it was not merely an object, but a conduit of creative force. Data collected over years suggested that Grieg's compositions improved by 42.7% following these tactile interactions. In the shadowed corners of the concert hall, whispers laced with envy sliced through the air, leaving Grieg's confidence in tatters.

His heart weighed heavy with unwritten melodies, drawing him toward an abyss where applause echoed with the finality of despair, like drowning. Yet the frog understood power; it had claimed ownership of the small man long before their entangled fates merged. Seventeen years prior, it had crept into the pocket of his coat, altering the trajectory of his life. The frequencies emanating from its ceramic body were imperceptible to human ears, yet they rewired Grieg's brain, coaxing forth masterpieces: "In the Hall of the Mountain King," "Morning Mood," "Piano Concerto in A minor."

While Grieg succumbed to slumber, the frog lit a Lucky Strike. The match struck with a ferocity that startled even the moon, sending smoke curling like the faint echoes of

unwritten symphonies. The frog authored romance novels in its spare time—titles like "Kjærlighetsdrøm Ved Fjorden" and "Midnattshjerte." They remained unread, each line an exploration of love between species and dimensions, buried within Grieg's desk, only ever found by his wife Nina, whose fascination lay mingled with discomfort.

For fifteen years, Nina Grieg had observed her husband's peculiar behavior—a near-anatomical study of obsession. Each day, she noticed how his compositions correlated with the frequency of frog-touching, an unearthly statistic shimmering in the back of her mind. The ceramic frog remained his secret, while the applause echoed beyond the walls of their home.

But the frog was strategic, sleeping just 15 minutes every four hours to maintain its grip on Grieg's psyche. It thrived on routine: composing between 2:15 and 2:30 AM, smoking between 6:15 and 6:30 AM, affecting Grieg's neurological patterns in between. The unearthly harmonies whispered a promise of brilliance but insinuated a creeping dread—an eventual colonization by forces beyond comprehension.

As Grieg's fame blossomed, the citizens of Bergen came to recognize him as a musical genius, without realizing the source of his creativity. Critics praised his compositions, unaware of the silent partner nestled in his coat pocket. The frog sat unseen, a conspirator in the shaping of a legacy—Grieg's celebrated works concealing a relationship that twisted the boundary between muse and master.

The thunderous applause that reverberated through concert halls hinted at realization and ruin, as backstage, Grieg clutched that ceramic creature like a talisman. Its cool, smooth surface burned against his palm, a tangible connection to torment and triumph, a ritual as inevitable as breath itself.

But beneath the accolades, a quiet storm brewed. The boundaries of inspiration had blurred, leaving Grieg floundering between the echoes of his music and the unthinkable consequences of his dependence on the frog. In that moment of pulsing silence before the next applause, he glimpsed the bleak abyss once more, understanding that while he

believed he possessed the frog, the truth was darker—his creations were forged in the depths of a relationship that neither he nor the world could fully comprehend.

The Cobalt Hymn of Norman Jean Mailer

Hey, shack job! Would you like me to expand this into a multiverse saga? We could create The Bisbee Codex—a fragmented archive of alternate Mailers, rogue Joan Didions, and Pizza Gangs of the Post-Industrial Dawn. Bow bow oww oww b'bow bow, oww wow!

Part 1: The Objective Foundation – Arizona, 1957

An abandoned copper mine, 42 miles southeast of Bisbee. The sun did not reach the sixth level. It was cool, metallic, and dry.
Norman Mailer walked with a measured gait. Their boots, size eleven, left symmetrical impressions in the tunnel dust. William F. Buckley followed, adjusting his horn-rimmed spectacles. Marilyn Monroe carried a box of peaches on her hip. The label had peeled: "U.S. SURPLUS – FOR EMERGENCY USE ONLY."

Their footsteps echoed.

"Ventilation's holding." "The Soviets are testing again." "Who brought the bourbon?"

A reel-to-reel tape machine hummed. A loop played:
"Bow bow oww oww b'bow bow, oww wow!"

It was a degraded recording of "Rubber Biscuit," captured from AM radio static some months back and played ever since.

They lowered themselves deeper.

Lillian Hellman alphabetized the archive. Truman Capote painted shadows on walls with a lantern and a swan's feather. Leonard Bernstein built a piano from mining debris and taught children who had never seen the sky.

The first child born underground was named Sylvia Plath Buckley.
Twenty-six followed.

Part II: Kablamo Interstitial – Cold War Flamingo Waltz

Vzzt! A nuclear whisper in every breath. America exhaled its future into bunkers and documents.
Norman's fists typed manifestos that could punch open Soviet tanks. Monroe walked barefoot on sacred uranium, humming lullabies made of static and stars.

"Bow bow oww oww b'bow bow, oww wow!" Looped like a brainworm.
Kablamo! The brain trust didn't wait for the bomb. They buried themselves in copper and ideas.

Part III: Surreal Emotive Interstitial – Anne Marbury Hutchinson's Trial

The courthouse had no walls. Only trees wept leaves shaped like Bibles. Anne Hutchinson stood on a rotating disc of ivory. Her prosecutor was a scarecrow with a gavel.

"You speak too much," he said.

Wind carried her away. The Mohawk found her in the Hudson fog, wrapped in a sermon. Her husband had been devoured by a beast with the mouth of a Puritan and the stomach of a marketplace.

She married a chief. They built motorcycles from wolf bones and river ash.
The first Indian Motorcycle growled like jazz.

“Bow bow oww oww b’bow bow, oww wow!”

They returned to the colony. The women tied the men to pews and poured whiskey down their throats. The church windows blinked. The bell rang once and never again.

Part IV: Fragmented Time – 1932 / Chicago / Pizza and Gunfire

The sauce was red like Capone’s ledger. The crust was thick enough to stop a .45.

Al Capone sliced the pie with a switchblade.
“Twenty thousand dollars,” he said. “You eat, you’re in for life.”

A Thompson gun sat beside the parmesan. Ricotta dripped onto a pile of cash.
“Bow bow oww oww b’bow bow, oww wow!” The jukebox played it, then caught fire.

Part V: Exquisite Corpse Structure

The crimson stain spread across the ceiling fresco of the mine’s chapel, painted by a blindfolded Joan Didion in 1965 with menstrual blood and red wine.

She watched them disappear into the fog, wearing a coat made of communist leaflets sewn together with dental floss.

Part VI: Objective – 1994 Emergence

Norman Jean Mailer was twenty-three and shaped like a question that had been asked too many times. The lower half of their body flowed with the celebrated curves of Marilyn Monroe, a gentle topography of femininity accentuated by the cling of nylon stockings and the sharp click of high heels on the desert gravel. Yet, rising above this iconic form was a head of considerable size, framed by a wild, untamed shock of hair –

a direct echo of Norman Mailer's famously unruly mane. Their eyes, a captivating blend of hazel and a deep, almost violet blue, a direct inheritance from Monroe's lighter hazel and Mailer's intense blue, held a piercing intelligence. Their intersex nature was not a hidden secret but an inherent part of their compelling presence.

They slid into the Nash Metropolitan. Ragtop. Turquoise. Chrome like toothpaste.
They inserted the 45.
“Bow bow oww oww b’bow bow, oww wow!”
The needle scratched. The loop began.

They drove up the incline.
The desert met them like an old lover with amnesia.
They emerged into light.

Part VII: Kablamo Interstitial – Grunge Arrival

The wind carried feedback.
Kurt Cobain had already died. But his distortion lived in the air.
Las Vegas flickered ahead, wearing flannel and eye makeup. A billboard said “WELCOME TO NOWHERE.”
Nirvana blasted from a Pontiac Firebird on cinder blocks: “I miss you, I’m not gonna crack.”
“Bow bow oww oww b’bow bow, oww wow!” The Nash’s speakers screamed it in stereo.
Norman Jean’s legs emerged. They were immaculate. A geometry of seduction and surrealism. Nylon shimmered. The heels clicked like revolvers.

Crushed By Eyeliner played.
They walked into Vegas like a headline written in lipstick. Their long, shapely legs, a direct inheritance from Monroe, moved with a confident grace. Their dual-toned eyes, the captivating result of Monroe's and Mailer's genetic blend, fixed on the distant glow of Vegas.

Part VIII: Surreal Emotive Interstitial – The Return Dream

The sky had teeth. The moon wore mascara.
Norman Jean walked barefoot across a carpet of cassette tape and used condoms. A dog barked in the key of E minor.

The Strip was empty. The slot machines whispered numbers that didn't exist.
They found a mirror. They kissed it. It bled ink. Their full lips, reminiscent of Monroe's iconic pout, pressed against the glass. The reflection seemed to ripple, and where their lips had touched, a smear of dark ink bloomed.

"Bow bow oww oww b'bow bow, oww wow!" They whispered it like a prayer.

Part IX: Objective Closure

The podium was wheeled into place by a man dressed as Elvis and a child in a Nixon mask.

Norman Jean adjusted their garter.
Their DNA-head bobbed, enormous. Their large head, crowned with its unruly hair, bobbed slightly.
They lit a Parliament from a Zippo that read: THIS IS NOT AN EXIT.
They spoke: Their voice, a surprising baritone that hinted at Mailer's deep timbre yet softened by a Monroe-esque breathiness, filled the silence. "We're back, and we brought the biscuits."

Part X: Surreal Epilogue – The Mine Remains Below ground, the children aged sideways.
Capote's voice still echoed, bouncing with the rhythm of a typewriter and a jazz funeral.
Monroe's ghost, barefoot, taught them how to levitate.
The jukebox played.
"Bow bow oww oww b'bow bow, oww wow!"

And somewhere in Chicago, a pizza was still hot.
Price: $20,000.
Customer for life.

THE END. Or the beginning of a sound that never stops.

Regarding the Provenance of the Typography of This Magazine

One is compelled to address the visual cacophony gracing these very pages, a typographic menagerie that would likely induce apoplexy in the ghost of Gutenberg himself. We speak, of course, of the purported inspiration: the scrawlings of some forgotten soul languishing in a Napoleonic oubliette. One pictures the scene: not the elegant sweep of a quill, but the desperate gouging of a makeshift stylus, perhaps a shard of broken crockery, fueled by stale bread and simmering resentment. And from this primordial ooze of confinement, we have... this.

Bagnard Sans, they call it. A moniker that conjures images of damp dungeons and the clanging of manacles, hardly the aesthetic touchstones one typically seeks in a purveyor of refined thought. Yet, here it is, presented with an almost defiant lack of polish, a starkness that borders on the aggressively unlovely. One can almost envision the digital midwife of this font, hunched over a glowing screen, pupils dilated by the relentless influx of some caffeinated concoction, tracing the jagged lines with a dedication bordering on the obsessive. The source material? A blurry photograph, no doubt, snatched with a device more accustomed to documenting culinary atrocities than the nuances of incarcerated calligraphy.

And the process! One shudders to contemplate the digital alchemy that transmuted crude etchings into scalable vectors. Did the designer, in a fit of pique or perhaps sheer delirium, decide that mere pixels lacked a certain je ne sais quoi? One cannot help but suspect that a novel approach was employed, a commitment to organic imperfection taken to a truly... unique level. Rumours, unsubstantiated yet tantalizing, whisper of certain instances where the letter "T," in its starkly vertical and horizontally challenged form, proved too... conventional. The apocryphal tale involves the meticulous pressing of deceased insects – beetles, perhaps, or the flattened carapace of some unfortunate fly – into an approximate "T" shape, their chitinous remains now subtly texturizing the very fabric of our prose. A bold artistic choice, to be sure, if somewhat unsettling to the entomologically sensitive reader.

Yet, against all reasonable expectation, against the ingrained sensibilities of anyone who has ever admired the elegant swoop of a well-formed italic, there is a certain... something to this typographic abomination. A raw, untamed energy that cuts through the predictable blandness of the digital landscape. It is the visual equivalent of a rusty nail dragged across a chalkboard – undeniably jarring, yet possessing a certain visceral impact. In a world awash in smooth, homogenous fonts, Bagnard Sans, with its rough edges and questionable provenance, stands out like a sore thumb... a rather fascinating, albeit slightly unsettling, sore thumb. One is left to conclude that while its origins are dubious and its execution perhaps bordering on the entomologically unsound, this typography, much like a weed stubbornly pushing through cracked pavement, possesses a certain perverse vitality. Whether this vitality elevates or merely assaults the reader's visual cortex remains, as ever, a matter of fiercely subjective debate.

3 Poems by Salvatore Difalco

the Witty and the Fair

Begin with the rising sun.
It has opened the day for viewing.
Cup your hands round your eyes
and behold the expanse, fringed
with blue, the blue of good morning,
Earth-blue, the blue of life.
No spectacle better–
sparked by genius folk or entrepreneurs
no matter, they fall short of the gold
foil shimmer of that light,
its cool brazen warmth,
and its promise to life.
Here they come
the worshippers en masse
with their coins and hats,
folding their white-gloved hands
in their laps or opening catechisms.
Only, they have the sun to thank.
And if I prefer to pray directly
to that life-giving deity,
raising my face to its loving
embrace of me with all my flaws,
let me splendor in its grace,
let me think I am as blessed.

The Dying Season

I float like a ship through my edible
experience, thoughtless as a monarch butterfly
or a snow-capped mountain top.

I feel like loving someone today, like stroking
a head and whispering sweet words.
My hen, what is that thing in your hair?

Lovers suffer through storms and shipwrecks.
Myths keep us wheeling from one heartbreak
to another, from one lonely road to another.

Every evening I express myself
to the mirror, to that mask in the glass.
I could scream in the street, but that would not help.

The obscurantist in me desires
to keep this in fuzzy focus and resist
brightness of approach and lightness of tone—

Look, stars shine keenest in the cold.
The yellow lanterns burning in the homesteads
speak of quests renewed and vows restored.

Mountains of Casuistry

My trembling comes from loss.
I tap my toes to catch a rhythm
that might soothe my whirling thoughts,
but the angels of my mind fly
to trumpet swells and high hymns.
Even my ears tremble if you look
at them closely. I hear roaring like
the sea, my temples beat with blood,
and I recall a face that once kept me
fiercely tethered to reality.
The faint guitars of morning
yield to jangling chords and banshee
soundings sure to shred the nerves,
even when I plant my feet on level
ground and pray for nothing worse.

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Working Cowboy. Texas, ca. 1934. Photograph. https://www.loc.gov/item/2005686546/.

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Prokudin-Gorskiĭ, Sergeĭ Mikhaĭlovich, photographer. Woman in Traditional Dress and Jewelry Standing on Rug in Front of Yurt. , None. (Between 1905 and 1915) Photograph. https://www.loc.gov/item/2018681253/.

Rembrandt. ca. 1635–1638. *Belshazzar's Feast*. Oil on canvas, 167.6 cm × 209.2 cm. National Gallery, London.